

IT SHOULDN'T HAPPEN TO AN ENGLISH TEACHER.

It was my first year as an English teacher in a boys' comprehensive school. I was a young man, brim-full of idealism and determined to make a difference. I was going to have higher expectations of the bottom English set. My time had come!

My Head of Department, Gilbert from Huddersfield, was sceptical. 'You'll soon learn, young man, he told me, tapping the side of his nose, 'where I come from we call a spade a spade. And that's the only thing these boys understand.'

I was left slightly bemused as to what he thought people called spades in other parts of the country, but I was too polite to ask.

I had been teaching the boys all about punctuation, in an effort 'to raise standards', but today I had decided to go even further. I was going to introduce the boys to Shakespeare, and, where better place to start than with the bard's most famous soliloquy?

As the boys sat quietly, I looked meaningfully out across the school playing fields, raised my right arm in declamatory fashion, and uttered the first line,

'To be, or not to be, that is the question.'

Taking a short pause, I basked in the glorious scenario that I had created in those boys' imaginations.

But as I prepared to move on, I heard a comment from the back of the room. It came from the much-feared Benjy Adler.

'No, it ain't!'

Ignoring this irritating boy, I carried on.

'Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.'

But Benjy Adler was not to be put off and, clearly incensed by Shakespeare's words, stood up in from of the rest of the class.

'No it ain't,' he said very decisively. 'That ain't no question. If it is, sir, then why ain't there a question mark? You told us that all questions gotta 'ave question marks.'

Benjy, as he surveyed the rest of the class, had made his judgement clear. 'And this one don't!'

Suddenly, the other boys, following Benjy's lead, joined in.

'Yeah, he's right!'

'On the money!'

'This Shakespeare geezer is just some posh bloke. He don't know nothing!'

You don't need me to tell you that the lesson went from bad to worse, despite all my attempts at appeasement. My final comment that, 'I was sure we would have liked Will if we had ever met him,' was the final straw, resulting, I am ashamed to admit, in jokes about his name.

The next day I was called into the headmaster's office. He had had a phone call from Mr. Adler, Benjy's father.

As I stood there, arms nervously twitching behind my back, the headmaster gave me his verdict.

'I suggest, young man, that you return to the idiosyncrasies of the semi-colon, or it be will be a full-stop for your career.'

That was the last time I ever took the bard into that classroom. Yes, I had made my decision.

It was, 'not to be.'